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Power and the paywall: A Black feminist reflection on the socio-spatial formations of publishing

Who owns knowledge? How do we disseminate it to benefit societal goals and values that speak norms of justice? Who should have access to knowledge? For whom should knowledge serve? In our time, the highly active landscape of knowledge production via publication, with widespread immediate interconnectivity of scholars around the world, allows for the making of a stronger intellectual community. It can be argued that this one of many impacts of globalization, in that academics are more interconnected than ever before, just as world economies, geopolitics, and global media. Moreover, the scholars who present new knowledges or make visible alternative knowledges come from a wider range of backgrounds than ever before, including non-white/Euro-descendant racial and ethnic groups, working class people, all genders, all sexualities, and non-Western nations. Beyond that, scholars are engaging with a broader body of research subjects and ideas that can transform society in exciting ways.

Understanding this means that theorizing the possibilities of open access is a productive dialogue. The challenges of paywalls are multiple and overlapping. Engaging in such debates calls for deconstructing the value of knowledge repositories guarded behind a pay schedule. There are a number of questions to raise regarding the gatekeeping mechanisms of paywalls: How do paywalls represent a form of power? For what reason do we create a financial barrier to intellectual labor? Aside from hosting intellectual work (in digital and print form), what is the necessity of creating a corporate system that profits from labor that journal hosting bodies are not financially or otherwise accountable to? The perspective in this paper is largely situated in a North American - primarily United States-based - perspective.

Already, elite hierarchies exist across higher education institutions, mostly privileging Western-based scholars. Consequently, these hierarchies function in ways that afford the greatest access to resources, including research funding, salaries, and facilities, to a relatively small population of the world. Those who are affiliated with more elite and generally Western institutions are the ones who have the greatest access to publications and intellectual work housed behind paywalls. Those who are not at these institutions rely on networks for accessing publications. These networks are both formal (scholarly listservs) and informal, peers at other universities, former classmates, the "six degrees of separation" between academics.

Publications important for a more publicly engaged dialogue are not exclusive to "pure" research articles. In addition to traditional theoretical and empirical contributions, papers in academic journals include dialogues, interventions and commentaries by groups of scholars around a social and/or disciplinary issue. Opportunities for scholars to engage in these conversations remain important for the transformation disciplinary approaches in theoretical and applied (both research-based and pedagogical) spheres as well as with the increased importance of engagements with global crises, such as human rights, climate change and public sector underfunding made pronounced by the COVID-19 crisis. By limiting these conversations to the library holdings of colleges and universities, which pay for the databases and individual journal databases for their respective campus communities, geographers and other scholars have limited options for accessing these debates.

The creation of higher education institutions in the United States - built on stolen land and undergirded by structural practices of exclusion, violence, and discrimination along racial and gendered lines - are complicated spaces. Here, public universities (also referred to as state colleges) that have large enrollments as well as independent, not-for-profit elite colleges, including those under the umbrella term of Ivy League, such as Princeton and Harvard, tend to have the widest recognition and economic access, and therefore opportunities, in the field of United States higher education. However, there are over 4000 institutions of higher education across the country and its territories, including Puerto Rico and Guam. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2020), total enrollment across all institutions of higher education during the Fall 2017 term was 20,138,477. The colleges and universities hosting these students range widely in scope and enrollment as well as funding and resources, resulting in complications related to preferential treatment of some institutions over others.

The funding model for higher education institutions, particularly for but not exclusive to public colleges and universities, is contingent on many factors. Since the financial crisis leading to the Great Recession of 2008, colleges and universities have faced tightened budgets that are further and increasingly restricted by reduced levels of funding by individual states and the federal government. As an example in Tennessee, state-level funding for public, four-year universities is based on retention and graduation rates rather than by a fixed, consistent number. As a result, the amount of funding received by state colleges and universities fluctuate from year to year. This practice results in increased pressure by faculty and staff on individual campuses to adhere to practices that ensure that the students who enroll ultimately complete their degree program.

Given the range of colleges and universities in the United States, resources vary across types. These include Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs); public, comprehensive regional universities; small liberal arts colleges; women's colleges; Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs); Tribal Colleges and Universities; and community colleges. Each type of institution has a very specific history and community associated with them. For example, HBCU are institutions established prior to the mid-twentieth century in order to address the educational needs of African Americans in the United States. HBCUs were

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established due to the injustices of American higher education created by legal segregation, structural oppression, and violence against Black people in the country (Bracey, 2017). Most HBCUs were founded by formerly enslaved people and/or churches and maintain strong links to Black people and communities throughout the country. Tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) largely originate in the second half of the twentieth century, with the first - Navajo Community College, now Diné College - having been founded in 1968 (Stein, 2009). Prior to this point, efforts to educate the Indigenous peoples were violent and pushed for assimilation into white settler society. These institutions are situated on or near Native American/American Indian reservations, lands designated by the United States government for American Indian nations to occupy. These reservations represent the failure of the colonizing U.S. government to honor Native sovereignty and of the unwillingness to relinquish stolen Indigenous land. I bring this variety of institutions to a conversation about open access publishing for a variety of reasons. Most importantly, the foci and historical communities for HBCUs and TCUs are embedded in elevating culture while providing a strong education. They are often, though, vastly under-resourced, particularly with respect to state and federal funding mechanisms in the country. In fact, Tribal Colleges and Universities rely on funding from the federal government under the Tribally Controlled Colleges and Universities Assistance Act of 1978 with strict restrictions for its use.

Ultimately, the funding and resources impacts library holdings, which are the major hosting body for journal and database subscriptions. Campus communities across the range of institution types I discussed earlier are actively engaged in geographic research and praxis. However, the limits of the institution impact the ways scholars can be engaged with a wide range of current research, debates, and practices. Understanding the disparities in funding and resources across the wide array of higher education institutions in the United States allows for seeing how structural barriers to publication access takes shape.

Another perspective of how to think through the uneven landscapes created by paywalls is to think about how open access publishing can broaden participation in recent disciplinary transformations. Highly regarded epistemological frames, such as Black geographies (Woods, 1998; Wilson, 2000; McKittrick, 2006; McKittrick and Woods, 2007), Latinx geographies (Muñoz and Ybarra, 2019; Cahuas, 2019; Ramírez, 2020), and queer and trans geographies (Johnston, 2016; Rosenberg and Oswin, 2015; Di Pietro, 2016; Ellison, 2019), have begun to gain traction in mainstream geography after having operated in pockets of the discipline, Black geographies in particular. Here, I want to discuss the importance of Black geographies as an option for understanding how removing paywalls can contribute to justice-oriented concerns.

With theoretical and empirical roots throughout the twentieth century, Black geographies has gained attention as a necessary intervention in the discipline, particularly over the last two decades (Darden, 1990; Gilmore, 2007; Finney, 2014; Bledsoe et al., 2017; Bledsoe and Wright, 2019; Ellison, 2019). Addressing the racial undergirding of space and place has offered new perspectives on environmental and social concerns for geographers and non-geographers alike. At the center of Black geographies is not a categorical interrogation of race but instead is a decentering of the hegemonic concerns and priorities of Eurocentric geographic approaches and the addition of critiquing the role of anti-Blackness in global societies. Black geographies scholarship is engaged directly in understanding the forms of expression and ways of knowing for Black subjects creating Black spaces. The ways that Black subjects understand and negotiate space is fundamental for the discipline. Publications behind a paywall are broadly inaccessible to the individuals and communities at the very center of Black geographies scholarship and, therefore, perpetuate barriers to dismantling hegemonic forms of knowledge production that are circulated through elite, predominantly Western circuits. The relations that are built from researcher to community as well as the documentation of relations within and attendant to Black spaces are indicative of the ways in which networks are built and maintained in the research process. Many of us who are Black, Indigenous and Persons of Color (BIPOC) scholars are outward facing and thinking about how we can maintain our individual needs as scholars with our practices of being situated in community.

One final important perspective to consider about debates in open publishing has to do with who does the labor of academic publishing in the first place (The Editors, 2019). Publications are the currency of the academic profession. Regardless of level or status within the academic realm - undergraduate to faculty - producing publications provides professional credibility and establishes one's reputation. Even now, there are secondary school programs that encourage student research and its accompanying publication output. In the United States, there is increasing favorability for prospective graduate students who apply to programs while having an established publication profile. And in the increasingly tight and competitive job market for tenure-track (semi-permanent and permanent) faculty positions across this country, even at colleges and universities that place a heavier emphasis on being a good teacher, the stress to incorporate research publications into candidate materials is ever increasing. Regarding teaching-intensive institutions, those whose research profile is generally at a lower threshold, peer-reviewed publications on the practice of teaching are increasingly more common, contributing to more knowledge production filling our journals. The role of publications as the currency of academia, particularly related to high levels of productivity – the expectation of multiple publications in any one academic term or year - is undoubtedly crucial.

With this in mind, however, one might examine the benefits, or lack thereof, for individuals to publish beyond reputation and standard professional practice. There is no remuneration for journal publishing. Articles and other forms of writing are submitted through and reviewed by a mostly unpaid labor system, which financially benefits the journal and its hosting body (O'Loughlin and Sidaway, 2020). The Editors went further, pointing towards the use of public funds through college and university subscriptions as a primary funding source for publishers (The Editors, 2019). Scholarly work is accessed by limited audiences, due to the constraints of holdings, as discussed earlier in this paper, and individual funds access. Meaning, public access to publications is inhibited by the pay-per-view model of article acquisition, which benefits privileged individuals and corporate bodies who are able to pay for the access. As Macleavy et al. (2019) and The Editors (2019) detail, exceptions to the unpaid labor standard are primarily reflected in editorship and production, while maintaining higher profit margins for publishers.

Multiple and overlapping effects of paywalls give way to the uneven landscape of access. What difference does it make if you cannot access the contemporary and ongoing developments in research and teaching practices that are situated in the conversation about paywalls? Given the demands of the academic profession, the publication industry is unlikely to disappear any time soon. However, the range of concerns raised in and beyond this paper pushes for naming paywalls as a form of power within which academics have to negotiate. Since we have a wide range of sources available for our view, we have an opportunity to imagine the transformation of public knowledge if paywalls are removed. Widespread open access publishing would bring about a more just distribution of knowledge within the United States and globally.

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